

# Brethren Church History

By Rev. Freeman Ankrum

## Alexander Mack

THE SNOWS OF WINTER covered the ground. The voices of the Wissahickon were muted by the ice. The cold winds souged through the leafless trees. Life went on at its usual pace in the village of Germantown, Pennsylvania. It was just two years past the half century since its settlement by Daniel Francis Pastorius. The winter was that of 1735. Into the modest log cabin known for many years after as "The Weaver House," there had come the indication of the passing from the scenes of earth, its occupant. Perhaps the change had not passed unnoticed by the three sons of Alexander Mack. When he called them to his sick bed for his final instructions, they must have known that the time would not be long until their separation. Not old, just 56 years, but the years were filled with suffering, disappointments. Enough grief to supply a lifetime of many more years, shortened the life of the sick man.

Alexander Mack had come from Germany to the new colony of Pennsylvania just six years before. Having fled the persecutions of the old world, impoverished, and robbed of his wealth, he sought a haven in the new. Here were those whom he had known in the Fatherland. Here were those of like faith; those whom he had led into the new life through the limpid waters of the river Eder in the Schwarzenau Valley. This man had no ambition for self-exaltation. Self-abnegation marked the greatness and true character of his noble soul. A refuge from the cruel inhumanity of war, his property had been confiscated by governments lacking nothing in cruelty. We find his body broken and the gates to the City of the great King slowly opening for him. He had manifested a self forgetful-

ness which exalted the cause of Christ and magnified the interests of the Church.

The real greatness of the man who was the organizer of the Brethren Church was manifested in the lowly cabin in Germantown when he called his three sons, Valentine, John and Alexander, Jr., to his bedside. Knowing that his earthly career was nearing an end, he looked forward to the time when the work would be given over into other hands. Calling the sons to his bedside he said to them, "Now when I am gone, don't mark my resting-place, or they might some time want to erect a monument over my grave." The sons protested that their honored father should not sleep in an unmarked grave. After listening to their appeal he finally consented that they might place his initials on his grave stone. It may be of interest to note that when the son John died and was buried in the little rock walled cemetery just a mile or more east of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, that the only mark on his stone were his initials "J. M." However the mere initials A. M. were meaningless to the passerby. Over the years he slept for more than a century and a half in a nameless grave.

Let us go back to the early life of this man, with whose passing this article began. Of his parents we know nothing. They lived in Schriesheim, in the Electorate of Palatia, between Mannheim and Heidelberg in southern Germany. Our lack of genealogical knowledge leads us to believe that the family was such as to furnish the character of Alexander as we know it. There was wealth—in mills and vineyards. There was a faith—Presbyterian, and Calvinistic. There was an opportunity for an educa-

Pen Sketch of seal of  
Alexander Mack



Graves of Alexander Mack, Jr.; Elizabeth, his wife; Alexander Mack, Sr.

tion. These things in that far-off day were not at all common. We can deduce from his writings that he did not have a classical education. We also know that he was a miller.

While he is often spoken of as the Founder of the Brethren Church, it would be more correct to state that he was the Organizer, and inasmuch as he was the leader in the organization, he was elected the first Minister of the initial group when they covenanted to go into the waters of the Eder that day in 1708.

In 1700 he married Anna Margaretha Klingin, a native of the community where he lived. She was about the same age as Alexander. To this union five children were born, three sons and two daughters. The names of the daughters were, Christiana and Anna Maria. While there has been some difference of opinion among some Historians, there is little doubt that the wife of Alexander Mack and two daughters died and were buried in Germany.

Following the organization in 1708 there was considerable liberty of conscience granted not only to them, but others of the Schwareznau assembly. Many had resorted hither to enjoy the liberty of practicing whatever they thought the Scriptures required. This liberty did not continue long. The infant community felt the lash of the oppressor as well as all other communities of like nature. God protected it, though there was much to be endured and sacrificed by the faithful. Their leader had a large share of persecution to endure, yet he was prepared by the Grace of God for the emergency.

Although he was rich and possessed of much goods like his Master before him, he became poor for the sake of those of like faith. The cruel hand of persecution frequently arrested the Brethren and confined them in prison. By his paying the money for the fines leveled upon them, they were released. This continued only as long as money was forthcoming. By paying the fines, his handsome patrimony, fine vineyards and profitable mill were taken from him. To avoid persecution he, with his Brethren, sought places of refuge, but for them none could be found in the Fatherland. Family troubles came to him as he traveled from place to place seeking a haven of rest. In 1720, twenty years after they had been united in the bonds of matrimony, and twelve years following the uniting of their faith in the cause of Christ, his companion was taken from him in death.

She found in death, that which her husband had sought for in vain on earth, a calm retreat where the storms of persecution could not lay cruel hands upon her. Her death was followed in one week by the death of the oldest daughter, then about six years old. Thus in the course of one week the hand of affliction poured out its contents of grief upon him in the loss of a kind Christian wife and little daughter.

The limitations of this article prevent the presenting of many details of the early life of the church as we find it in his day.

After seeking unsuccessfully to find a retreat from persecution in his native land, the decision was made to emigrate to America. Hither some of the early members of the church had come, landing at Philadelphia. Alexander Mack and his three sons, and a number of the Brethren came to America in 1729, landing at Philadelphia in September. In the village of Germantown then,

some five miles from the Port city, he with his three sons settled as a poor man. Yes, poor in this world's goods, but rich in faith. Here for the first time in years in the log house erected for him by loving hands his soul found rest from persecution. He was not idle, but assisted Peter Becker in the ministering of the Word to the Church in Germantown.

While there was surcease from physical persecution, Satan did not permit the beloved organizer of the Church to rest. There were those who brought divisions. Misunderstandings arose. Mack traveled from place to place in the attempt to counteract the inroads of diversion. Humility, zeal, self-denial and charity were among the graces which adorned his character. These things are evident because of the choice of the elements making up his seal. There is hope that some time the actual seal may be found, though we know the imprint as secured from wax impressions. The late Elder G. N. Falkenstein states in regard to the seal and we quote: "The entire combination constitutes a remarkable index to the character of its owner. In the center is the cross, which means sacrifice; the heart means devotion; the branches of the vine mean fruit-bearing. Thus the seal reads: a devoted, fruit-bearing, sacrificed life. How significantly true this is of the life of Alexander Mack."

At the time of his baptism in Germany he was twenty-nine years of age. While the great work of Alexander Mack was accomplished in Europe, six years in America were long enough to impress its character upon the life of the mother Church. He was a firm believer in the doctrines of the Church and would countenance no innovations.

However he was a very meek and humble man. This was manifested in his dealing with Conrad Beissel, a former member of the Church who had left the original group, rebaptized himself and resorted to the frontiers to set up a Monastery at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. Alexander Mack visited him from time to time to attempt a reconciliation. This failed though Beissel held no animosities against Mack. Mack was not easily convinced in regard to any new doctrine, and looked with suspicion upon any new movements, and men at variance with the plain teachings of the Bible. The Organizer of the Church, enabled by wisdom and Divine guidance to lay the foundation, has been proved by the centuries as being sound in every way. Time has put the stamp of approval upon his work. The only foundation was the old Book with all its simplicity. When his followers down through the years have followed closely his footsteps, they have made progress and prospered as a people. When they have departed, innovations and difficulties have invariably followed.

(Second part next week)

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## *Alexander Mack*

### PART TWO

Alexander Mack has not only numerous Spiritual followers scattered today wherever the Gospel is preached, but he also has many lineal descendants faithfully carrying on the work begun by him two hundred and forty-four years ago. The author is the seventh lineal descendant. His mother's maiden name was Mack. In the book, "Alexander Mack, The Tunker and Descendants," which will soon be out of print, the author has listed the names of over 3300 of Mack's descendants, and there are many not listed. Today we find them working in many churches, and not the least in the Brethren Church. Surely if he had been mistaken in his leadership, there would not have been the continuation of faithful followers down nearing a third century. We might also add that there are many living in Ohio and Pennsylvania who still carry the fam-

ily name of Mack and many of them are likewise connected with the Church.

Returning now to the event which headed this article, we would like to quote from one of Pennsylvania's noted Historians, Julius F. Sachse, "Let us lift the veil of the past for a few moments and picture to ourselves and the generations of the future the scenes enacted at the burial of this venerable patriarch and warrior in Christ.

"No sooner had the soul taken its flight upon that bleak winter night, than the Einlader or Anzeiger (notifier) was sent out towards Germantown, Ephrata, Coventry, Oley and the Swamp. Wherever there were Brethren they went from house to house, advising them of the death of the patriarch and inviting them to the funeral. This was a peculiar custom in vogue among the Germans

and existed down to the early years of the present century.

"Other brethren again took charge of the obsequies. The schriner (cabinet maker) was sent to measure for the coffin. This was a shaped wooden box made from unpainted cherry wood, and thus believed that the grave worm could easiest penetrate the wood, and thus believed that the body would be devoured more quickly. In making the coffin great care was taken that no shaving escaped. These, as well as all particles of saw dust were carefully gathered up and placed in the bottom of the coffin, and then covered with a fine linen cloth, upon which the body was placed. The reason for this great care was the belief that if any particle escaped, whatever house it blew into the next death would occur therein in the near future. Then, when the coffin was carried into the house of mourning, it was always brought in head first, or else another funeral would soon follow. Care was also taken to have the foot always toward the door and the lid hidden behind the outer door.

"There were two peculiarities about this coffin. Owing to the prominence of the deceased, eight metal handles were procured, a species of extravagance rarely indulged in by the Germans of that early day. The other was that the lid was a peaked one, giving the body ample room. The ordinary coffin of that day had a flat lid, and was commonly known as a "nasenquetcher," from the fact that it often flattened the nose of the deceased.

"Great indeed was the company that assembled on the day of the funeral; the humble cabin in Bettelhausen, wherein reposed the mortal remains of the patriarch, was much too small for the multitude who had journeyed from all quarters, over the snow capped hills, to bear tribute to the character and pure life of the founder of the German Baptist Brethren in America. A man who was once in affluence, while in the Fatherland, gave up his all for the cause, came to the wilds of America for conscience' sake, and here ended his days in a cabin built for him with the contributions of the charitable.

"Upon this occasion were gathered the Brethren from Germantown. Prominent among them were, Peter Becker, Christopher Saur, Heinrich Kalkglaser, Heinrich Pastorius, and others old and young. Then came the solitary from the Cocalico, who, led by Beissel, Wohlfarth, and the Eckerling brothers, all in their picturesque Pilgrim garb, had walked the whole distance from Lancaster over the frozen ground in silence and Indian file. There were Brethren from Coventry and Chester County with Martin Urner, who had but a short time before been consecrated by the deceased as his successor and bishop of the denomination in Pennsylvania. There was also a deputation of the Sabbatarian Brethren from the French Creek. Lastly, there came from the ridge of the heights of the Wissahickon those of the Pietists of the Kelpius Community who still lived as hermits. Among these recluses were Conrad Matthai, Johann Gottfried Selig, Daniel Geisler, Christopher Witt, Andreas Bony and others; all to perform the last homage to their religious leader now reposed cold and inanimate in a lowly cabin by the roadside.

"The obsequies commenced, as was the custom about noon with a funeral feast, of which gammon, cakes, cheese, and punch were important features. This was fol-

lowed by religious services, lasting until the sun had set, and when darkness had fairly set in a cortege was formed. First came the flambeau-bearers; then the carriers, four whom bore the coffin upon their shoulders; then followed the Wissahickon Brothers, chanting the De Profundis alternately with the Ephrata contingent, who sang a hymn especially composed for the occasion. The rear was brought up by the relatives, friends and Germantown Brethren.

"It was an impressive and weird sight as the cortege, with its burden and flickering torches, filed with slow and solemn step down the old North Wales road. A walk of about a quarter of a mile brought them to the graveyard. It was merely a small field, half an acre in extent, which was divided from the road by a low stone wall and partly fenced off from the other fields by a rail fence. The ground was known as "Der obere gemein Kirchhoff" (the upper common burying ground), and was free to all residents who had contributed towards the wall and fence, or such respectable white residents as paid a certain sum for opening the grave. The ground belonged to no particular congregation, nor was it consecrated ground in the usual sense of the word.

"When the procession arrived at the grave, the sight was an inspiring one, worthy of the artist's brush; the hermits and brethren in their peculiar garb, with uncovered heads and long flowing beards, chanting their requiem; the snow covered ground; the flickering torches; the coffin with rude bier, the black, yawning grave; and the starlight canopy above. As the mourners surrounded the grave, another dirge was sung while the body was lowered into its last resting place. Three clods were thrown into the grave, a hollow sound reverberating in the night air as they struck the coffin.

"The ceremony was typical of the return of the body to dust from whence it came. A number of Brethren then seized spades and then filled the grave. When it was about half-filled the torches were extinguished and then thrown into the tomb and the filling then proceeded. After this the company dispersed, and the body of Alexander Mack, the founder of the Dunker denomination in America, was left to repose in its narrow cell until after the lapse of a century and a half, when the remaining dust was tenderly removed to consecrated ground in the rear of the church of which he was the patriarch. Well may it be said that he now rests with his own people."

The simple stone erected over the grave of the patriarch reads in the German, "Here rest the remains of A. M., born 1679, and died 1735, aged 56 years." At this place the body remained until November 13, 1894, when it was removed to the cemetery at the Church of the Brethren at 6611 Germantown Avenue, Germantown, Pennsylvania, where it now rests. Rev. G. N. Falkenstein with the assistance of others, had it removed from the new deserted Upper burying ground to its present resting place. The place is marked by a slab bearing the following inscription: "Alexander Mack, Sr., the first minister and organizer of the Church of the Brethren in the year 1708. Born at Schriesheim, Germany, 1679. Came to Germantown, 1729. Removed from Axe's burying ground 1894." Next to his grave is that of his daughter-in-law Elizabeth, wife

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of Alexander Jr. By her side rests her husband Alexander Jr., who died in 1803.

There is pointed out in Germany today an old mill where Alexander Mack is supposed to have worked in 1710. One of the prized possessions of Bridgewater College, Bridgewater, Virginia, is one of Alexander Mack's Bibles. There are notes on the margin evidently made by the hand of the organizer of the church. This book is well preserved and is kept in a glass covered box and in a fireproof safe. The Bible was handed down to Alexander Mack, Jr., and since then has been owned by the Germantown Congregation, Elder Philip Rothenberger, Elder Henry Kurtz, and Elder Jacob H. Kutz who let Dr. John S. Flory have it for the College in 1911.

The world is much richer today because Alexander Mack lived. Though his soul has long since gone home to God and his remains returned to the dust of the earth, his work lives in the lives of his Spiritual and physical descendants. The Crowning Day in the Kingdom above will be the final day when his work can be fully evaluated.